Approved - SnowTRAC Meeting Minutes 8/28/2013

SnowTRAC Members Present:
1. Andy Morrison - Chair - ORTAB/SnowTRAC Liaison
2. Dan Mayfield – Co-Chair - Mat-Su/ Copper River Basin
7. Gary Anderson - Kenai Peninsula/ Valdez/Prince William Sound
8. Erin McLarnon - Mat-Su/ Copper River Basin
9. Doug Boulden - Kenai Peninsula / Valdez / PWS

DNR Staff Present:
10. Ed Fogels – DNR Deputy Commissioner
11. Ben Ellis – Director of Alaska State Parks
12. Darcy Harris – Alaska State Trails Program Coordinator
13. Jamie Walker - Administrative Operations Manager
14. Steve Neel – Alaska State Parks Grants Administrator
15. Justin Wholey – Resource Specialist - Alaska State Trails Program
16. Wayne Biessel – Mat-Su/Copper Region Parks Superintendent
17. Teri Zell – SnowTRAC grant Administrator
18. Kyle Kidder - Div. Mining, Land, and Water

Public:
19. Scott Connely – Snomads Snowmachines Club President
20. Deborah McGhan – North America Outdoor Institute (NAOI)
21. Randy Crosby – Alaska Snowcat – Petersville Groomer
22. Rick Northy – Caribou Hills Cabin Hoppers President
23. Jay Northy
24. Kevin Kastner – Iron Dog Inc.
25. Harry Holt - Lake Louise Snowmachine Club President
26. Corky Matthews – Lake Louise Snowmachine Club Treasurer
27. Jack Kreinheder – Trail Mix Inc. President
28. Dave Luce – Groomer Susitna River/Yentna
Wednesday, August 28, 2013

Introductions
SnowTRAC members, DNR staff, and the public introduced themselves. Some joined the meeting via teleconference. New board member Doug Boulden was in attendance.

Board Elections

Motion
Jim Stanford nominated Cindy (Hite) for the Chair position again. Stephen Enochs seconded. Cindy Hite declined. There was no vote.

Motion
Dan Mayfield nominated John Scudder to be the new chair. John Scudder declined. There was no vote.

Motion
Stephen Enochs nominated Andy Morrison for Chair. Cindy Hite seconded. Andy Morrison accepted the nomination for Chair.

Vote
(9 yea, 0 nay) Motion Passes

Motion
Gary Anderson Nominated Dan Mayfield for Co-Chair. Steve Enochs seconded. Dan Mayfield accepted nomination for C-Chair.

Vote
(9 yea, 0 nay) Motion Passes

Andy Morrison is the new Chair and Dan Mayfield is the new Co-Chair.

Public Comment & Funding Discussion
Rick Northy (Cabin Hoppers President) explained that last year his club groomed a 100 mile of trail system, with a total of 1500 miles of grooming, and logged 500 volunteer hours. He told the board that his club groomed $8000 billable hours that were not groomed with SnowTRAC funds (to make a point that state funds only cover some of the costs). His club also spent $3000 in non SnowTRAC funds for summer trail work. He said that his club supports safety, meaning wide-groomed trails and signs for snowmachining and dog-mushing. He was concerned that 6 hours was spent on grooming standards during the last meeting, but nothing came of it. He supports a one on one meeting so members have direct contact. He also mentioned that he had been working with legislators to try to get a line-item for more SnowTRAC funding.
Scott Connely (Snomads President) explained that his club (400+ members) has also put a lot of their own money into their trail system, with significant volunteer effort. He also mentioned working with the legislature to find more money for SnowTRAC. The Cabin Hoppers sponsored a fat-tire bike and jogging race last spring, as well as a ski race. Lacey Lane was added to the trail system this year.

A round-table discussion began about grooming costs in the SnowTRAC program. A question was raised: Is there a formula for calculating how much it costs to groom trails? Parks staff answered that there is not a standard formula used by groomers. A meeting with Wayne Biessel (Mat-Su/Copper Basin Superintendent) and several groomers took place last year to determine standard grooming costs; Biessel said they made progress but have a ways to go to have standards finished. Board members and the public discussed problems with assigning standard costs, including differing amounts of traffic on trails, and primary vs. secondary trail grooming costs.

Randy Crosby (Alaska Snowcat groomer) said that the SnowTRAC program is on life support and groomers are fighting over a shrinking pot of money. He also said he asked for the actual cost to groom the trails, and if everyone did the same there would be a more accurate depiction of total funds needed for the program.

A discussion began about SnowTRAC funding, and how more money is needed to run the program. Ideas such as increased registration fees, and snowmachine registration enforcement were among the topics. A recurring theme was that Anchorage cross-country skiers received a grant for just under a million dollars without asking for it; how could SnowTRAC replicate this? Another idea was to collect money from other user groups (other than snowmachiners) that used the groomed snowmachine trails. A longer registration period (4-6 years) at point of sale was also mentioned.

Jack Kreinheder (Trail Mix President) talked about the Juneau area with its 400 registered riders. He explained that there are only a few trails in Juneau, but these trails are important to groom; they travel through the woods to allow snowmachiners to access alpine areas where most riding happens. He said that raising fees is controversial in Juneau since rural areas don’t benefit from SnowTRAC. He mentioned that some states have both a snowmachine registration fee AND a trailhead fee to more appropriately charge users; other states are between $45-$50 rather than $5.

Dave Luce (Mat-Su groomer) agrees with an increased registration fee for snowmobiles, but not a trail-usage fee; he feels that people will use the trails regardless. He said the trails on the Yentna River are getting marked and kiosks are erected, but the trails aren’t maintained often enough.

Kevin Kastner (Iron Dog Inc.) thanked SnowTRAC for their work over the years, and mentioned that he can send out public announcements at the Iron Dog expos about how snowmobile registration fees pay for grooming. He supports NAOI’s efforts for safety projects. He also mentioned the option of removing line items from his budget if SnowTRAC doesn’t agree with an expense.
Discussion with State Parks Director

Ben Ellis introduced the new Administrative Operations Manager at Alaska State Parks, Jamie Walker. He spoke about the budget shortfalls within State Parks; several positions have been left vacant. The RecTrails program has a serious budget shortage, and may run out of funds in early 2014; it is unknown what will happen. He also explains how SnowTRAC and ORTAB rely on each other; the managers of both programs are the same staff, so the viability of each program depends on both existing.

Ben Ellis answered questions with the rest of his time. He explained that Representative Fairclough supports SnowTRAC, but doesn’t think the legislature will appropriate any money. Several other topics were discussed, including requesting State Parks and DOT work together for funding, winter trail system development, increased registration fees, tapping into the state gas tax for funds, and South Denali ground-breaking. Another possible funding source could be charging a fee (like a boat launch fee) at trailheads; this would be through regulation rather than legislation. A change of management of SnowTRAC from state government to a non-profit was also discussed; the director said he didn’t oppose this.

One idea to increase funds collected was to rotate State Park Rangers around the state to enforce snowmachine registrations; one hurdle is that most park rangers are off during winter. Another idea was to start a survey to gather data about how important snowmachining is to Alaskans.

Board members discussed how the current teleconference meetings for SnowTRAC are inefficient; Director Ellis explained that it was his decision to not pay for per diem and airfare due to limited funds in the Parks budget, and the fact that SnowTRAC is not a Governor’s Board.

DPOR Reports and Huslia Discussion

Grants Administrator Steve Neel reminded the group that 5 non-grooming grants were awarded for the 2011-2012 SnowTRAC season. Excess funds not used from last year will be moved to this year. He brought up the fact that nothing has been billed from the Huslia Tripods project; he mentioned that the folks he has been in contact with are different than those who applied for the grant, and it has been difficult to make contact. Technically the grant has expired, but there is some leeway to wait for a bill a bit longer.

Motion

Dan Mayfield moved to move the $15,407.98 (from the un-billed Huslia project) to this year’s fund (this year’s pool of SnowTRAC money). Cindy Hite seconded.

Discussion

Some board members were hesitant to cut off funds to the Huslia project with haste; they thought that they needed more information, and communication with folks in rural Alaska is different.

Vote

(5 yea, 4 nay) Motion Passes
Before the board discussed individual grants Steve Neel mentioned that money from ORTAB is no longer available for SnowTRAC. He explained that in the past, there were fewer of motorized applications for ORTAB, so it made sense for ORTAB to fund part of SnowTRAC (to satisfy percentage requirements for motorized usage); this is no longer the case.

**Safety & Education Grant Discussion and Voting**

Before the discussion, conflicts of interest were discussed, and Dan Mayfield was the one board member that receives grooming funds (through Big Lake Trails Inc.) through SnowTRAC.

Some members were concerned that if the safety projects are funded, that it spreads the grooming money very thin, and that Lake Louise is applying for a grooming grant for a new trail, even though the board has mentioned in the past that no more trails will be added to the grooming pool. The possibility of having these grants accepted by ORTAB was also discussed, but this would delay the project until the following year; there is also a very small chance that any of these safety grants would be awarded by ORTAB because it is very competitive, and has a 5% cap. It was noted that the program has shifted from a grant-oriented program to a grooming-oriented program.

Grants were then discussed and scores were looked at. One thought was that the grooming grant application (not the returning groomer application) from Lake Louise should be given the same reduction in funding as the other returning groomers (because there is not enough money to fund the groomers fully). Another concern about Lake Louise was that the trail will become part of the grooming pool (see above paragraph). A concern about the Snomads grant is that it is a grant for plowing a parking lot just off a maintained borough or state road; some members think that State DOT or the Kenai Peninsula Borough should take care of it. It was noted that the Snomads haven’t asked either entity about this possibility.

**Motion**

Dan Mayfield moved to partially fund the Lake Louise Snowmachine Club initiative (John Lake Trail Grooming) for $3,875. He would like to fund that at the same level (percentage) as any of the (returning groomer) grooming requests, and disregard the other grant applications at this time due to austerity reasons. Gary Anderson seconded.

**Discussion**

One member thought there should be more discussion about this before an official motion. Another member didn’t agree with the second part of the motion.

**Vote**

(5 yea, 4 nay) Motion Passes

Some board members were concerned with this vote because safety will not being addressed, and folks may avoid applying for safety grants in the future.
Grooming Pool Discussion

Dave Luce mentioned that he may have seriously underbid for grooming the Yentna area and asked about additional funds. Wayne Biessel informed him that money can be moved around in the grooming pool, but only the amount up the request can be used initially. More funds can be requested but there is no guarantee they will be granted.

It was pointed out that some groomers have asked for more money this year than last year, with less money available. Ways of scoring groomers was also discussed, including trailhead/kiosk comment sheets and having trail-users contact Parks directly. Other ways of dispersing SnowTRAC funds to groomers was also discussed, such as a standard grooming cost per mile, not contracting groomers that only groom for part of the year, and not funding grooming in State Parks.

Motion

Andy Morrison moved to fund the trail grooming requests for 2013/2014, including the John Lake-Eureka Trail at 60% of the request. Jim Stanford seconded. Andy withdrew his motion until after Ed Fogels’ discussion.

Ed Fogels Discussion

Deputy commissioner Ed Fogels thanked the SnowTRAC board for their commitment. After a brief introduction he welcomed questions from the board and the public. Board members brought up ideas to increase funding for SnowTRAC with Ed Fogels, including raising registration fees, extending point of sale snowmachine registrations to 4-6 years, a fundraiser, tapping into the state gas tax, an economic impact study about the value of snowmachining to give to the legislature, and corporate sponsorship. The board also described all the volunteer hours many clubs put into grooming and signing. The idea of SnowTRAC being run by a non-profit was also discussed; staff turnover was also mentioned by board members as a reason a statewide trail system hasn’t come together. Ed Fogels told the board that he would make a commitment to get information from DOT and the Department of Revenue to see if there are other ways to find funds for SnowTRAC; he told the board that he really wants to get stuff done.
Continuation of the Grooming Pool Discussion

Motion
Cindy Hite moved to remove DPOR funding requests, as well as Yukon Quest’s funding requests, and fund grooming as a cost per mile. John Scudder seconded.

Discussion
Some members didn’t like the idea of a cost per mile rate. One member brought up how much work was done to add Fairbanks into the grooming pool. Another member thought that picking and choosing grooming areas like this could challenge the validity of the board, and set the precedent for only grooming in Southcentral Alaska. The issue of the Snomads applying significantly more in their grooming request was addressed by Scott Connelly; a trail that was formerly groomed by the Caribou Hills Cabin Hoppers is getting taken over by the Snomads now.

Vote
(1 yea, 8 nay) Motion Fails

The discussion continued about whom to fund and how to allocate SnowTRAC money. The board talked about how the Denali Highway grooming is problematic; it is only groomed starting in February, high winds often drift over grooming, and the grooming is essentially to make a trail to private lodges (businesses).

The board talked about finding a fair way to allocate the funds. Based on some groomers asking for more money than last year, the board looked at basing the upcoming season’s groomer funding on last year’s actual expenses, and reducing each groomer’s funding by the same percentage to fully use this year’s funds.

*The actual amounts charged by returning groomers last year were added to the new groomers’ funding requests to determine an uninflated funding request total, which was $293,285.45. The board determined that there is $219,702.02 for SnowTRAC to spend for the 2013/2014 season. $219,702.02 is 74.9% of $293,285.45, so it was proposed that groomers get awarded 74.9% of their actual expenses billed to SnowTRAC last year (2012/2013 season), or if they’re new groomers this year (or grooming a new trail) they get 74.9% of their funding request. There was a concern by some members that funding requests may have been inflated to try to receive more money this year, that’s why last year’s actual billed expenses were used.

Motion
John Scudder moved to fund last year’s actual maintenance costs to include Alpine, Hatcher pass, and John Lake at 75%, and the Lower Susitna Yentna - Dave Luce. Dan Mayfield seconded. (For clarification on this motion see paragraph above preceded with the asterisk.)

Vote
(9 yea, 0 nay)
Closing Discussion

Increasing registration duration for snowmobiles was brought up again; a lifetime registration was mentioned as well (both would be at a higher cost that the current registration, but be valid longer). An idea that money for a longer registration would need to spread out (funds from 4 year registration would need to be spread out for grooming and grants over 4 years, for example). A recap of ways to bring in more money for SnowTRAC was listed: longer snowmobile registration period, snowmobile registration enforcement-State Parks law enforcement, obtain funds through the Alaska gas tax, and solicit a new economic impact study (to highlight how important snowmachining is to Alaskans).

Travel costs were briefly discussed. Since Alaska State Parks isn’t paying for travel, one member wonders if someone could write a grant for these expenses through SnowTRAC funds.

Motion

Andy Morrison moved to adjourn. John Scudder seconded.

Vote

(9 yea, 0 nay)

Meeting was adjourned at 4:50pm.